DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 157 CG 017 528

AUTHOR Peters, Elana
TITLE Long-Term Marriage and Late-Life Divorce.
PUB DATE 21 Nov 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (36th, San Francisco, CA, November 17-22, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Development; *Divorce; Gerontology; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Marital Instability; *Marital Satisfaction; *Older Adults; Psychological Needs

ABSTRACT

Projections, based on current rates, are that 40% of recent marriages will end in divorce. To investigate the factors associated with long term marriage stability and satisfaction among elderly persons, 60 California older adults (30 married, 30 divorced) were interviewed about their perceptions of the role of companionship, alternatives to marriage, and marital satisfaction in relation to marital stability. An analysis of the results showed a direct relationship between marital stability and companionship, with 70% of married persons sharing high companionship and only 30% of divorced persons having shared a high level of companionship during marriage. A large majority of divorced persons (80%) perceived a greater number of alternatives to marriage, while only 20% of married persons expressed a high perception of alternatives. Those divorced or married persons who perceived fewer alternatives were more satisfied with their marriages than persons who perceived high alternatives. Divorced persons were less satisfied during marriage (56.7%) than presently married persons (86.7%). These findings suggest that a high companionship, role reciprocal marriage is essential for late life satisfaction. (BL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED245157

" LONG-TERM MARRIAGE AND LATE-LIFE DIVORCE "

A Paper Presented to:

THE GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA
1835 K Street, N.W., Suite 305
Washington, D.C. 20006

AT

The National Scientific Conference
San Francisco, California
November 21, 1983

CG 017528

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elana Peters

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Elana Peters, M.A.
OASIS Senior Center
800 Marguerite Avenue
Corona Del Mar, CA 92625

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

This research study was the result of nine years of counseling and observing Seniors. I have discovered that the older we grow the more different we become. There were such notable differences in couples who were in long-term marriages, both as "a couple" as well as "the individual" in the relationship.

So many of these marriages had become feats of endurance, marked by bitterness and resentments for mistakes and omissions of the past years. While others were marked by an obvious, genuine concern for the marital partner as well as a sense of humor about life with its sorrows and celebrations. For these latter couples, there present lives, in body, mind and spirit, were happier and healthier than those who just endured life and the marital relationship.

From these personal observations, through the design and the implementation of the intensive interviews and the conclusions, came a vast array of knowledge, empirical validations of my observations as well as some very interesting serendipitous findings. A most rewarding research project!

Elana Peters, M.A.

INTRODUCTION:

In the United States, today, marriage is emphasized as the most significant relationship between two persons with the expectation that it will be the most important source of emotional satisfaction and support for its participants (Udry, 1966). However, a high and sustained level of divorce exists. Projections, based on current rates, are that 40% of recent marriages will end in dissolution (Norton and Glick, 1976).

For many elderly couples marriage may be the relationship which offers the most support and supplements well-being (Comfort, 1976). This could be changing. Divorce among women 65+ has doubled in a five-year period. While only 1% of the divorcing population, this is a substantial increase for a short-time period (Uhlenberg and Myers, 1981).

The aging population of the United States is growing rapidly with 45 to 50 million persons expected to reach their 65th birthday by the year 2000 (Havighurst, 1977). With the elderly living longer and in better health, some are taking a second look at a less satisfying marital relationship and choosing divorce as a reasonable alternative.

Marital dissolution is a costly experience in terms of finances, social status, religious principles or emotional bonds. For many elderly, whose resources diminish over time, divorce can be a disruptive force adding to their vulnerability (Chiriboga, 1982). Thus, the divorced elderly might require supplemental social and financial supports from welfare, kin and other psycho-social resources.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

During the past decade, most marital research focused on marriage quality and its determinants, with adjustment, happiness, satisfaction and well-being as the most frequently studied variables (Lewis and Spanier, 1979)

Marital stability, as suggested by Spanier and Lewis (1980), is an area to be studied in the 1980s, with attention to the transition points in marriage. The transition from middle to old age, with its decreasing resources, brought about by retirement, role-loss, economic change, social status and health, can be a stressful period of resignation or adjustment.

Empirical research on long-term marriage is minimal and most of the literature is restricted to discussion and assumptions based on factors associated with late-life satisfaction. With so many elderly living longer and in better health, studies of long-term marriage from the perspectives of quality and stability seem imperative.

Significant data on divorce among the elderly is limited. If sociologists and researchers are concerned about the future marital and familial experience of the elderly, then it becomes important to study the area of marital stability and the potential of increasing divorce among the elderly (Uhlenberg and Myers, 1981).

The possibility of divorce becoming a more frequent experience for the elderly might be assumed for four reasons: (1) the annual divorce rate for the elderly increased from 1.2% in 1970 to 2.2% in 1975 (Carlson. 1979). Although this is only 1% of all divorce, this doubling is significant. (2) Individuals entering old age in

the future are more likely to accept divorce as a solution to an unsatisfactory marriage. (3) The increasing economic independence of women may encourage higher divorce (Uhlenberg and Myers, 1981). (4) The ever increasing lifespan, with the probability of a good, healthy old age being 85 years by the year 2000 (Stanford University, 1980), might imply more elderly persons wanting a higher quality of life in the remaining good years.

This marital research looks at the elderly and their marriage experience in an attempt to obtain reasonable and pertinent information which will be useful to sociologists, gerontologists and marriage counselors for program implementation and directional guidance. The main questions which were asked here are:

1. Among elderly persons, what are the factors associated with long-term marriage stability as compared to divorce?
2. Among elderly persons, what are the factors associated with marriage satisfaction?

DEVELOPMENT OF THE HYPOTHESES:

For this research, the definition of long-term marriage is one of 30+ years duration with all respondents being 60+ years of age.

A social exchange type model was designed which views the husband-wife relationship as a primary reciprocal unit. When two persons marry, they enter an exchange agreement, that is, they are partners and exchange goods and/or resources To each member of the marital relationship the goods or resources have different value levels when viewed as costs, rewards or alternatives. For most married couples, the reward minus the cost has to be a profit, or at least and even exchange, to maintain a lasting relationship.

Using social exchange as a base for analysis, the marital

relationship can be seen as a series of behaviors which involve an exchange or resources. Each partner is a personal resource for the other. What does each partner offer the other; what does each one lack; and how are the desired resources supplemented in the marriage?

A review of the literature found the most significant resources for satisfactory aging and long-term marriage to be economic security, companionship, role-loss, health, religion and social approval. Any change or imbalance of the six resources constitutes a cost depending on the attribution of value to a particular resource. If either partner was to lose any of, or experience change in these resources, is there enough compensation in the alternatives to maintain the marriage or is dissolution the preferred alternative?

From the findings in the literature and the author's personal experience in social services and counseling the elderly, a 66 question personal-data interview was developed to determine the factors associated with long-term marriage stability as compared to divorce. The questionnaire was designed with low-value demographic questions first (See Table I), then on to more value-laden questions pertaining to marriage satisfaction, companionship and alternatives.

Marital satisfaction, companionship and alternatives are viewed as independent variables which effect marital stability. Marital satisfaction is also used as an independent variable in some hypotheses, while companionship and alternatives are dependent in others. The following hypotheses were developed:

I) Divorced persons share less companionship while married than presently married persons.

II) Divorced persons' perception of alternatives is greater than presently married persons.

Table 1
Demographic Variables: Comparison Table of Mean or Relative Frequencies for Married or Divorced Individuals

Number	Variable Description	Married	Divorced
V1	Age of Individual	73.6	64.3
V2	Number of Years Married	48.5	33.8 (before divorce)
V3	Number of Living Children	2.1	3.2
V6	Number of Grandchildren	3.6	3.8
V7	Number of Great Grandchildren	1.1	.25
V8	Respondent's Education Level (some college & above)	50.0%	76.7%
V9	Spouse's Education Level (some college & above)	50.0%	63.4%
V10	Retired But Working	26.7%	6.7%
	Retired At Home	73.3%	26.7%
	Working, Full Time	0.0%	46.7%
V12	Religious Preference		
	Protestant	66.7%	56.7%
	Catholic	20.0%	23.3%
V13	Church Attendance (once a week +)	40.0%	26.7%
V18	Total Income		
	$60,000+	0.0%	20.0%
	$50-59,999	0.0%	3.3%
	$40-49,999	3.3%	0.0%
	$30-39,999	0.0%	10.0%
	$20-29,999	23.3%	23.3%
	$10-19,999	56.7%	30.0%
	$4,500-9,999	10.0%	10.0%
V32	Health Today		
	Excellent	33.3%	60.0%
	Good	40.0%	33.3%

III) Divorced persons are less satisfied while married than presently married persons.

IV) Divorced or married respondents who share companionship were more satisfied with their marriages than persons who do not share companionship.

V) Divorced or married persons who perceive fewer alternatives are more satisfied with their marriages than persons who perceive higher alternatives.

METHODS:

The population sample was taken from Senior Centers, clubs and meeting places where older individuals congregate. Sixty (60) intensive interviews were conducted in the Southern California area in the summer of 1982. Of the sixty respondents, 30 were married, 15 males and 15 females, and 30 were divorced, 15 males and 15 females.

Since the sample number was 60 and the data used to measure the independent and the dependent variables was ordinal in nature, the coefficient of association was used and is represented by "Q". "Q" is defined and computed thus:

$$q = \frac{(b)\ (c) - (a)\ (d)}{(b)\ (c) + (a)\ (d)}$$

The measure of association summarizes the relationship depicted in the following cross-tabulation tables and indicates how strongly two variables are related. Thus, it takes on a positive value if the concordant pairs predominate; a negative value if discordant pairs predominate; and zero value if they are equal.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS:

Hypothesis I:

Table 2
Companionship Variables by Divorced and Married*

Companionship Variables	Divorced		Married		n
4-8 High	a) 30%	(9)	b) 70%	(21)	30
9-17 Low	c) 70%	(21)	d) 30%	(9)	30
n		30		30	60

*q = .68966

"Divorced persons share less companionship while married than presently married persons." As expected, only 30% of divorced persons share a high level of companionship while married, and 70% of those presently married share high companionship. This correlation is strongly significant as q= .68966 and the data supports Hypothesis I, that there is a direct relationship between marital stability and companionship.

Companionship is one of the most important factors throughout marriage (Stinnet, Carter and Montogomery, 1972) but becomes even more important in older marriages since so many older persons' later years are marked by reduced participation in other institutions and declining social resources, therefore late-life marriage companionship can satisfy many of the emotional and social needs and add to a higher morale and heightened sense of well-being.

Hypothesis II:

Table 3
Alternatives by Divorced and Married*

Alternatives	Divorced		Married		n
18-33 High	a) 80%	(24)	b) 20%	(6)	30
34-49 Low	c) 20%	(6)	d) 80%	(24)	30
n		30		30	60

*q = .88235

"Divorced persons' perception of alternatives is greater than presently married persons." Table 3 indicates that 80% of divorced persons perceive high alternatives while only 20% of married persons express a high perception of alternatives. The percentages justify and indicate a strong relationship between marital stability and perception of alternatives, since q= .88235. The data supports Hypothesis II as there is a high percentage of alternatives among those divorced.

In interviews with divorced persons, some indicate that they had not perceived alternatives at the time of their divorce but because they had to seek other resources. i.e., getting a job and seeking companionship, found that indeed there were alternatives. Thus, this study could not measure alternatives at the time of marriage for those who became divorced and therefore this might limit the findings.

Hypothesis III:

Table 4
Marital Satisfaction by Divorced and Married*

Marital Satisfaction	Divorced		Married		n
3-9 High	a)	56.7% (17)	b)	86.7% (26)	43
10-16 Low	c)	43.3% (13)	d)	13.3% (4)	17
n		30		30	60

*q = .65502

"Divorced persons are less satisfied while married than presently married persons." As expected, the majority of married persons (86.7%) express high marital satisfaction while 56.7% of divorced persons express high marital satisfaction while married. There is a strong correlation, with q= .66502, and therefore the data supports Hypothesis III.

The inference from 56.7% of divorced persons having high marital satisfaction while married suggests that those persons who are left or who do not initiate the divorce are satisfied with the status quo.

In several interviews with those persons who had not initiated the dissolution, they express satisfaction with their marriages although they had not been totally happy or fulfilled. Perhaps some individuals are willing to endure the present relationship rather than dissolve it or disturb the status quo by mentioning their dissatisfaction to their spouse. Renne (1970), in a study of marital dissatisfaction, finds marital satisfaction to be an integral correlate of emotional and psychic well-being.

Hypothesis IV:

Table 5.
Companionship by High and Low Marital Satisfaction*

Companionship	Marital Satisfaction: High = 3-9	Low = 10-16	n
4-8 High	a) 60.5% (26)	b) 23.5% (4)	30
9-17 Low	c) 39.5% (17)	d) 76.5% (13)	30
n	43	17	60

*q = .65502

"Divorced or married respondents who share companionship are more satisfied with their marriages than persons who do not share companionship." As expected, a greater number of persons (26) who have high companionship also have high marital satisfaction; 60.5% were in this category; while 13 individuals (76.5%) who had low companionship also had low marital satisfaction. With q= .66502, the data supports Hypothesis IV.

The literature review supports this hypothesis and this data adds even more credibility to the importance of companionship in marriage and most especially late-life marriage.

This researcher interviewed several married persons who are dissatisfied with marriage and share few of the companionship variables but they have high marital stability. Of these persons, some cited failing health (Renne, 1970) and needing their spouse to care for them. Others indicated that their finances keep them in their present marriage or that the state of being married is a

valuable resource in itself. For these persons, the priorities of status quo and economics might account for high marital stability.

Hypothesis V:

Table 6
Alternatives by High and Low Marital Satisfaction*

Alternatives	Marital Satisfaction High = 3-9	Low = 10-16	n
18-33 High	a) 41.9% (18)	b) 70.6% (12)	30
34-49 Low	c) 58.1% (25)	d) 29.4% (5)	30
n	43	17	60

*q = .53846

"Divorced or married persons who perceive fewer alternatives are more satisfied with their marriages than persons who perceive higher alternatives." In Table 6, 44.9% of married or divorced persons have high alternatives and high marital satisfaction while 70.6% have high alternatives and low marital satisfaction. Respondents expressing high marital satisfaction but low alternatives comprise 58.1% of the sample. Since q= .53864, the data supports Hypothesis V.

With 76.6% of married or divorced persons expressing high alternatives and low satisfaction, the data suggests an area that this researcher discussed in Hypothesis II (page 7)--that of preserving the status quo, since most of those interviewed who are less than satisfied and have alternatives do not see divorce as an option or choice.

IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION:

The findings indicate that the factors strongly effecting marital

stability are high companionship, high marital satisfaction and perception of fewer alternatives. What about the many low satisfaction/high stability marriages? For whatever reasons, finances, status quo or health, these individuals do not see divorce as an option or choice. Marital satisfaction and happiness are personal and private dimensions. The literature suggests that some individuals are not going to express unhappiness or dissatisfaction when they have spent 30 or more years in a marriage.

Psychologists and marriage counselors suggest that marriages which in late-life are unsatisfactory and lack strength are generally unhappy ones and have long been that way. In some marriages the hurts, frustrations and recriminations of the years ooze like poison to paralyze and destroy any of the necessary strengths or mutual fulfillments which could be gained from the marital bonding. Indications from previous research (Renne, 1970) suggest that in some cases the marriage is so unsatisfactory and the resentments so strong that these unhappy marriages might affect physical and mental health.

Although this researcher is not advocating divorce, interviews and social services indicate that a high companionship, role reciprocal marriage is essential for late-life satisfaction and a good morale in the face of declining resources.

Anderson (1979) suggests that chronically unhappy marriages should be dissolved well in advance of the demanding togetherness of later life as they can seriously impede both partners' chances for successful living. She adds that a good spouse, one you like to be with, is a companion without parallel in the business of living.

PERSONAL EPILOGUE:

Each individual has/her own opinion, feelings and methods of dealing with the challenges of life. Some individuals become depressed, crabby and complain about their problems and do nothing. Other individuals laugh, shrug their shoulders and accept the challenge.

Three married couples were in this researcher's opinion genuinely happy. Together, these couples had a sense of humor as individuals and as couples, that is, they laughed at and with one another.

Each of the male respondents (90, 81 and 79 years) had outside jobs. The man of 90 was an auto mechanic and another was a carpenter, and neither one of them needed the money. Their employers were so grateful to have them, as they were skilled and dependable workmen. The third man volunteered his time to helping out with those less fortunate than himself in his church. Each of their spouses had a volunteer activity outside the home. This work and activity gives the couple independence and purpose.

These three couples were all physically active regardless of age and slower physical responses. One couple rides their tandem bicycle to the senior center. They have been married for 58 years. All of these couples were in the lower end of the middle-income range.

This researcher is still a believer in attitude and self-fulfilling prophecy -- that is, if you think old, you feel old and act old. Married and divorced respondents who were observably enthusiasitic about life and enjoying it were not wealthy, the best looking or in the best of health, but they had FABULOUS attitudes. Life's problems had become challenges and the brillance in their eyes when they related accepting life's challenges and overcoming the problems told the whole story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Barbara Gallatin
1979 The Aging Game. New York: McGraw-Hill Company

Carlson, E.
1979 "Divorce rate flucuation as a Cohert Phenomenon." Population Studies 33:523-536

Chiriboga, David A.
1982 "Adaptation to marital separation in later and earlier life." Journal of Gerontology 37, 1:109-114

Comfort, Alex
1976 A Good Age. New York: Crown Publishers.

Havighurst, Robert J.
1977 "Status research in applied social gerontology." In Barry and Wingrove, Let's LearnAbout Aging. New York: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc.

Lewis, Robert A. and Graham B. Spanier
1979 "Theorizing about the quality and stability of marriage." In W.R. Burr, R. Hill, F.I. Nye and I.L. Reiss (eds.), Contemporary Theories About the Family. New York: Free Press, 268-294.

Norton, Arthur J. and Paul C.Glick
1976 "Marital instability: past, present and future." Journal Of Social Issues, 32 1:5-20.

Renne, Karen S.
1970 "Correlates of dissatisfaction in marriage." Journal of Marriage and Family 32, 1:54-67.

Spanier, Graham B. and Robert A. Lewis
1980 "Marital quality: a review of the seventies." In Felix Berardo, "Decade review: family research." Journal of Marriage and Family 42, 4:96-110.

Stanford University
1980 "Report by a physicians' panel on the Phil Donahue Show.

Stinnet, Nick, Linda M. Carter and James Montgomery
1972 "Older persons' perceptions of their marriages." Journal of Marriage and Family 34, 4:665-670

Udry, J. Richard
1966 The Social Context of Marriage. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co.

1981 "Marital alternatives and marital disruption." Journal of Marriage and Family 43, 4:889-897

Uhlenberg, Peter and Mary Anne P. Myers
1981 "Divorce and the elderly." The Gerontologist 21, 3:276-282.